



## HIPAA Compliance – What Medical Interpreters Need to Know

HIPAA compliance is crucial for all healthcare providers. It ensures the facility follows all of the rules regarding patient privacy, which is essential.

In the world of patient care, medical interpreters are a critical part of the equation. About [35 million](#) U.S. citizens who are over the age of 18 don't speak English at home. That's more than 15 percent of the population.

While some of those 35 million adults do speak English very well, many don't. That's why medical interpreters are so vital.

As a medical interpreter, you also have a responsibility to maintain patient privacy. If you are wondering how the HIPAA rules impact you, here's what you need to know.

### What Is HIPAA?

HIPAA is an acronym that stands for "Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act." It's a federal law – overseen by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services ([HHS](#)) Office for Civil Rights – that outlines the proper treatment of patient information, which is labeled as Protected Health Information (PHI).

Within HIPAA, there are also rules regarding health insurance coverage retention when changing positions. However, those typically aren't relevant to medical interpreters.

In the simplest sense, HIPAA requires medical professionals – including medical interpreters – to safeguard patient data. This includes in communications – both verbal and in writing – as those can contain patient details that need to be protected.

## What Qualifies as PHI?

A variety of patient details fall in the PHI category. Personally identifiable information (PII) – including names, addresses, phone numbers, dates of birth, demographic classifications, Social Security Numbers, and more – are all part of the PHI group.

Additionally, many health details qualify as PHI. This includes:

- Past, present, or future medical concerns or diagnoses, including physical and mental health conditions
- Appointment schedules
- Provider names
- Treatment types
- Test results
- And more

Essentially, most patient details are protected, even if they seem small or inconsequential.

## How HIPAA Violations Impact Medical Interpreters

Above all, HIPAA protects patient privacy. As a medical interpreter, you have to treat all patient information correctly. Otherwise, you're not HIPAA compliant.

The penalties for a HIPAA violation can be incredibly severe. Violations can come with steep fines as well as criminal charges.

While willful violations come with the steepest penalties – including up to a [\\$50,000 to \\$100,000](#) per violation fine and up to [five years](#) in prison – even unknowing or reasonable cause violations have penalties. You could still see fines up to \$50,000 per violation, even if the incident was accidental and not willful.

## How to Remain HIPAA Compliant as a Medical Interpreter

Here's a look at what medical interpreters need to do to remain HIPAA compliant.

### Don't Discuss Patient Details with Anyone Who Isn't Directly Involved with the Patient

As a medical interpreter, you need to ensure that you don't reveal any patient details to anyone who isn't directly involved with the patient. This means limiting communication to only pre-approved individuals on the medical team and pre-authorized family members or friends.

If you need to share information with an approved individual, you must do so only if others can't overhear the discussion. Usually, this means entering a private space and closing the door.

### Exercise Caution When Using Unprotected Emails, Messaging Systems, or Phone or Video Call Systems

Unprotected email and messaging systems, as well as phone or video call technologies, aren't inherently secure. As a result, you need to make sure you don't reveal certain patient details when using those communication tools, ensuring the patient's privacy if the message or call is intercepted by an unauthorized party.

Avoid using the patient's full name or revealing PII that could lead to the patient's identity. Limit the sharing of medical details that could make the patient known to others as well.

## Properly Dispose of or Store Paper That Contains PHI

If you end up with documents or take notes that contain any PHI, make sure they are stored or disposed of in accordance with HIPAA policy. For example, this can mean using only approved storage mechanisms – both physical and digital – or a HIPAA-compliant shredder, depending on whether the paperwork needs to be maintained.

## Stay Up-to-Date on Patient Privacy Laws

Like many regulations, patient privacy laws can change, as well as vary by location. States may enact more requirements, or new federal policies may make process changes necessary.

For example, the Health Information Technology for Economic Clinical Health ([HITECH](#)) Act serves as a supplement to HIPAA. It outlines additional requirements regarding the use of technology by healthcare providers and, since online communication platforms are increasingly common, can impact medical interpreters.

## Do You Need Reliable Medical Interpreters and Medical Translations?

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